

Gadsden Elementary Students Garden Their Way to a Healthier Lifestyle

Issue

Gadsden Elementary School nurse Andrea Williams and some teachers at the school in rural Richland County noticed students were not eating the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables. In South Carolina, 368,000 children and adolescents are classified as overweight or obese, which is 5 percent higher than the national average. Poor nutrition, such as not eating enough fruits and vegetables, can lead to obesity. “The school realized these improper eating habits were affecting the children,” Williams said. “To make the greatest impact, the school decided it was time to promote a healthy eating message for the families, faculty, staff and community.”

Intervention

Gadsden Elementary’s Green Thumb Club, which introduces students to the art of gardening, was a way of attacking obesity and poor eating habits in a creative way. Students cultivate soil, plant seeds, maintain a garden and harvest and prepare food. Students also used the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s MyPyramid to guide their food selections. While incorporating fresh fruits and vegetables, the students learned the colors associated with each food group and the importance of eating a balanced diet that includes all the food groups.

Thanks to recognition and support from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control’s All Health Team and funds from the Preventive Health/Health Services Block Grant, Green Thumb Club members were able to expand what they learned into their school and community in the following ways:

- Newsletters and recipe cards were sent to faculty, students, families and the community teaching the importance of eating fruits and vegetables;
- Green Thumb Club students learned the appropriate seasonal foods that could be planted in the garden. They grew their own seasonal produce at school and home;
- Food preparation was taught to help facilitate positive eating habits as a life skill. Tasting parties were held at school. Parents and faculty were able to experience eating an array of healthy offerings from all food groups.

Impact

The following results occurred in the 2006-2007 school year:

- A total of 176 students and their families, 45 faculty members, seven faith organizations and five businesses received the newsletter monthly;
- Twenty-five faculty members lost a combined 93 pounds thanks to Green Thumb Club efforts;
- All 30 club members and several faculty members begun home gardens. They also assisted two private child-care centers, five community elderly individuals, and an adult assisted living residential home with planting a garden;
- The program was featured on WLTX-19, WIS-10, *The State* Newspaper, *Columbia Star* and S.C. Educational Television (ETV) in Columbia. Media coverage helped educate the general public on the benefits of gardening and eating healthy.

The Green Thumb Club is preparing to show other schools and community groups how to duplicate the project. Plans are under way for the Green Thumb Club to support a “Healthy Garden” at S.C. Clemson Extension by exhibiting creative fruits and vegetable beds.

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